1. Is subjectivity overly celebrated in the arts but unfairly condemned in history? Discuss with reference to the arts and history.

Theory of Knowledge Essay

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Art and history are some of the most if not the two most influential tools at our disposal when we want to interact with each other. In many aspects history and art are irreconcilably opposed, as could be seen the eternal battle between the arts and the sciences, but in what they have in common, their analysis of the human condition, one through our actions and other through our creations, they both are subject to the equally eternal battle between subjectivity and objectivity. In this essay I intend to analyse the capability of both subjects to be subjective and objective and in the end determine which of both is the one that in reality dominates the field. My belief is that objectivity and subjectivity can be approached through the lens of Art by the way we as consumers of art can measure and evaluate the quality or value of an art piece, meanwhile, because analysis of historical events is crucial and inseparable of the act of doing history, being as objective as possible is essential in order to present as unbiased a view as possible of the events that transpired and their relevance. Let us now begin analysing subject by subject the potential for subjectivity and objectivity of first, art and then history.

First of all we need to define what art even is. For now we will discard the higher adjective of “art” as something of quality and simply say that any “art” is a visual, auditive, literary or touch-oriented element that describes within its limitations the thoughts and feelings of the artist. And thus, all we have left is our interaction with the art in question, as it is in the nature of any art to be experienced by others. And that experience is unique to any and all individuals and completely impossible to predict of you feel about the art in front of you, do you like it, dislike it, love it, repulse it, it doesn't really matter how much effort the artist put into it or with whatever goals, it can’t please everyone, but that’s also what allows so many people to enjoy it and to spark discussions like the one i’m writing right now. So, if art can’t be equally perceived and evaluated by everyone, how can it be subjective? In a statistical way. Checklists and committees and competitions and exhibitions exist because evaluation and categorization are also a way we interact with art, and as such the quality of art (not its condition as “art” as we established) may be objectively measured and averaged. I think that subjectivity in art is in fact the Status quo, and an attempt to centralise, or in whatever other way “objectify” the arts would definitely be met with backlash specially from those whose art's inherent subjectivity serves as a refuge from a perhaps otherwise hostile society and establishment. The artistic community has always been a meeting place for the outcasts that discovered the wonders of personal expression through the artistic process. It’s these minorities that undoubtedly would be the first victims of any attempt at the objectifying of art.

However, I think that the key to this issue is that art has no other choice than subjectivity. It is in the nature of art to be pleasing to a part of the human population and unpleasant to the other part, and it is far beyond the reaches of art to be objective, provable or in any way quantity its quality. Far from a tribunal of five or one hundred and five, probably the best way to measure an art piece’s objective condition would be to make a worldwide poll so that a human consensus may be made and every possible opinion accounted for, but that’s impossible. Unlike history, art does not have any sources (apart from inspiration, and in any case that would make it even more subjective), records or any other evidence that before a tribunal of highly qualified professionals would make them universally judge a piece in a certain way. The fact is that history is a science while the arts are art. Even though some reject the notion that the social sciences such as history are even a science, it is the very point of science to be provable and repeatable so that its veracity is beyond question. The

misfortune is that history is inevitably linked to humanity and the human experience; and humans are fallible, forgetful, ideologically inclined, prone to changes of mood and opinion, motivated to purge and clean other unlike themselves and so many innumerable facets that make the thankless task of rigorously recording history hard beyond measure. Think of history as a sort of asymptote that tries to achieve the total truth about the past but is impossible to do so because of the aforementioned characteristics of humanity (and the fact that many historical events won't be able to be recorded because of loss of sources). History is a key subject to understand the world we live in, and if this subject is not kept in some regard "objective", if will become fraught with manipulation and alteration of the perceived "truth" of the past, this paves the way for the instalment of radical ideas of the past that may justify or imply the necessity of certain actions. To speak clearly, extreme ideologies foster where the past is nebulous and those extreme ideologies are capable of imposing their own narrative of it in order to appear more pliable to their target audience. This is what happens when there aren't checks and balances for a coherent historical consensus clear of as much subjectivity as possible. This reflection leads us to analyse some of the other problems inherent to history and the inevitable human lens through which it is viewed

There are several problems with history and objectivity. Apart from the "asymptote" problem (not everything in the past can be known), a question remains: Who determines what's objective? And even though we could simply point to the scientific process and call it a day, because history revolves around humans (and we already established the inherent problems with that), not every single historian who takes a look at the same evidence (if that evidence is even trustworthy) will reach the same conclusion, that though is plain foolish. We can't treat history like Plato's dialogues, where at the end of an arduous debating session we will reach "THE TRUTH" about a historical fact. Thus… what are we to do? We could direct our rigorousness to either the sources or the historians. By being restrictive and sceptical of the truthfulness of historical documents, records, fossils, and other evidence used commonly in the practice and evaluation of history, we could both narrow down the possible conclusions reached while being certain that all historians parted from the same rigorous base. The other possibility is determining that the truth is what the majority of historians say it is in their work, not unlike an election, natural scientists may scoff at this, but where does the phrase "the scientific consensus says…" come from? Not even by using the supposedly empirical scientific method does every single person in the traditional science reach the same conclusions. Nowadays we could say that we are using a combination of both scenarios I described, from a very specific pool of resources, the majority of the conclusions reached form the historical consensus. Many more troubles and issues could be no doubt detected in regards to the objectivity and subjectivity of history, and even more solutions could be drafted to try to solve those issues within the frame of a field dominated by the human experience.

The truth of the matter is that neither the arts nor history are capable of being entirely objective. That is because both deal with a part of the human condition, art, what humans create, and history what humans do. And I don't think I have to repeat the fallibility of humans. The reason why the natural sciences are able to deal with objectivity much better than the humanities is that they don't have to deal with humans at all, but instead to the uncaring, unsympathetic, perfect-for-study universe around us. But, history is not history without its own attempt at objectivity, rigorousness, without that we would be talking about propaganda, or worse, lies. And art couldn't be art if it weren't for its subjectivity, as no one

would enjoy it. In summary, both Art and History are derived from our actions as humans, beings capable of rationale, critical though, informed decisions and creative works; art deal with what humans create (for innumerable purposes), and because there can never be a uniformity of opinion on any subject, and the objective of the vast majority of “Art” is to please the consumer, it cannot escape the grasp of subjectivity. History on the other hand is the field of the decisions humans take and their consequences, and because the historical facts (whose authenticity may rightfully be brought into question in any case) cannot convey the teachings the historian wants to convey on their own, a degree of interference is required in order to prevent the practice of history from becoming sterile, from this, the objectivity of a historical piece may be doubted and solutions must be put in place to evaluate the case.

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